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PSYCHIC RESEARCH

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Psychic Research, "not to put too fine a point upon it," means for the most part thus far a careful and systematic investigation of the phenomena of spiritualism. A more elegant and reputable camouflage might be devised for it, and of course the name can be legitimately used to designate the study of many things with which spiritualism has nothing to do. But words have to be taken in the sense which common usage gives to them, and practically psychic research is the study of spiritualism. It used to be said by almost everybody, except the spiritualists, that the matter was not worth investigation; it was all an unwholesome mass of fraud, imposture, and delusion, to which no reasonable person would think for a moment of giving serious attention. Very likely a good many people are saying that still; but not if they have enough knowledge of the facts to serve as the basis of intelligent judgment. Whatever frauds may be practiced in the name of spiritualism, there are plenty of occurrences which no sane mind, having real knowledge of them, will attribute to that source.

It is more common now to hear these occurrences ascribed to telepathy, which is perhaps correct; though where that conclusion is most confidently stated there is probably least right to hold it. Of telepathy very little is yet known, and what has been proved would seem to indicate that it is a faculty of quite limited range and power. It cannot be invoked to explain the facts which spiritualism presents without extending its capacity enormously, far beyond anything that is known of it elsewhere. Possibly it has this greater gift; but that is something

which requires to be shown, not merely taken for granted. One can only jump to the conclusion that it has the gift; and this jump is often made, one must say, less for the sake of getting at the truth than for the purpose of getting rid of spiritualism. However, the investigation has now proceeded far enough so that we may intelligently state the issue to be, "spirits *versus* telepathy." Either there is some limited communication with personalities which have survived the change of death, or telepathy is a power of the mind possessing hitherto undreamed-of capacity.

The purpose of the present paper is abundantly fulfilled if it can be shown that this is the issue to which psychic research has brought us, and that however unable we may now be to demonstrate in favor of spirits, we are quite as far from being able to give the case to telepathy. Whether or not this is a matter which no one can ever find out, remains to be seen. At present not many have the means at hand for making a decision of that question. Some minds of first-rate ability in close contact with the investigation have given their verdict strongly and unhesitatingly in favor of spirits. The general public may be in a better, or worse, position for exercising a dispassionate judgment; but it has no right to deliver an opinion which would close the case. As the matter now stands, with what it now knows or what can be shown to it, this public cannot be fairly asked to accept the views, say of Sir Oliver Lodge. But neither has it any good right to say that he is altogether deluded and mistaken. So far as it has any right to judge, the case for telepathy is quite as dubious as that for spirits.

The heart of the problem which psychic research has attacked is the attempt to decide the real value of what purports to be evidence of the survival of personality after death. Its main task is the study of what is offered as proof of personal identity from a source beyond our

sight. Is one disqualified for that study when he admits the possibility of such survival? No more, certainly, than when he starts with a denial of such possibility. In truth, whatever may be its prepossessions, a candid mind ought to be able to deal fairly with what it finds. The demand on it in this case is that it shall concentrate its attention on this question of the sufficiency of the evidence for personal survival.

It is often said that the chief interest lies elsewhere. One hears people declare, for instance, that they will listen to what psychic research has to tell them when it can disclose something worth while about the nature and character of a future life, and not till then. But the first question is, Do spirits exist? Surely if an effort were made on the other side to communicate with us here, the first endeavor would be not to describe conditions there but to say, "This is So-and-so, whom you have formerly known. By such and such memories which we share in common you may know that I am speaking." In point of fact this is mostly the character which the spontaneous communications take. The first thing to do is to find out, if possible, whether this appearance of actual communication is true or false.

It may be said that if they who are, by hypothesis, trying to give assurance of their continued existence can furnish this, they ought to go on and satisfy our curiosity about many other things, and that their apparent inability to do this throws fatal discredit upon the whole manifestation. But that is a too hasty and superficial judgment. The means of transmission might suffice for the one thing and not for the other. If we consider presently what such a line of transmission may possibly be, this should be quite evident. Just here it cannot be said with too much emphasis that if there is anything of this sort to investigate, it is, first of all, the question of personal survival and personal identity. Do the supposed

communicators give sufficient evidence to warrant the conclusion that they are real persons, and is the assertion that they are such more reasonable or more credible than other explanations of the origin of the communications ?

Probably all who have looked into this for themselves will agree that it is not a case for snap judgment, for or against. Questions of personal identity are generally apt to need rather careful handling. Everybody must know something of the way they are treated in our courts of law. What a long time it took, and what almost endless discussion, to dispose of the Tichborne case in England! Do such and such things prove, or do they not, that the claimant at bar is Roger Tichborne or Arthur Orton ? How this debate went on for days and weeks, and on what "trivialities" it mostly turned! The question in the case of psychic research is not unlike that.

First and last there is a very considerable amount of evidence in the literature of psychic research that is worth serious study. Unhappily, thus far it lies embedded in a mass of irrelevant matter, so that the search for it is like the quest for Gratiano's "two grains of wheat hid in two bushels of chaff." And when it is found everyone has to be his own lawyer in dealing with it. No one can doubt when he hits upon some of the more striking incidents in this literature that they do constitute evidence of something. But just what it is that they prove is likely to be, to the mind unskilled in the handling of such evidence, one of the most baffling questions it could take up. It is difficult to make any theory cover all the facts in the case. There is great need that someone should make a selection of what really has evidential value, and examine it with that critical skill which a good lawyer or a good judge brings to bear upon the evidence presented to a jury in court. A little of that has been done, but not very much; and if the investigation is to go on, it is a job that some competent person ought soon to tackle.

Suppose we glance for a moment at the method pursued in gathering this evidence, and at some of the difficulties of arriving at a satisfactory conclusion with regard to its meaning. Most investigations now make use of automatic writing, which is found on the whole to yield better results. This has the advantage of making an exact record of the alleged communications, and also it stops an immense amount of merely inconsequent talk; thus reducing the labor of separating from the flood of verbiage anything that seems to deserve further study. Now it is easy enough for anyone to write whatever comes into his head and call it "automatic." But whoever cares to look into the matter can soon satisfy himself that there is plenty of such writing in which the person who does it is not consciously responsible for what is written. Automatic writing, however it is to be explained, is an undoubted fact.

Mostly, when left to itself, that is to say when it is not guided by leading questions, this writing takes the form of an attempt to reveal and establish personal identity. It pretends to come from some person, no longer living in this world, who seeks to convey to those who are still in the flesh an assurance of his continued existence. Now and again what comes in this way is remarkably convincing. It really seems as if the person in question were close at hand, dictating the words that are being spoken or written. We are told, and no doubt with truth, that the best of this evidence does not get into print. It is too intimately personal to submit to public inspection. However, what is printed, if one will have the patience to fish for it in somewhat extensive seas of vapid talk, is often very good. But it comes only as it were in brief snatches, and is never long sustained. After a kind of sunburst of startling impersonation which fairly takes one's breath away, so realistic does it seem, the communications trail off into a sort of dream-like drivel, or even into mere stupid misstatement and gross fabrication.

Why is it then that these attempted impersonations are by fits and snatches so remarkably lifelike, and for the rest so wretchedly ineffective? If they are the mere masquerade of secondary personality, why this curious unevenness of quality, and where does the information come from on which the impersonation is based? Does it come from other adjacent minds through some process of telepathy? Perhaps so. But the telepathy which can get into the mind of an utter stranger and, with little delay, select out of a great store of memories covering many years a group of pertinent incidents connected with one single personality, is a somewhat staggering thing to think of. To go by the record, we are required to suppose that this telepathic faculty sometimes ignores altogether what is in the foreground of the consciousness it is exploring, and brings forth what turn out to be facts from a depth which conscious memory does not reach. Moreover, it has to be a telepathy that can work upon occasion across hundreds of miles of space. The writing has been known to use information that could not have been derived from any living person without going that far afield. No one is in position to say that this cannot be done; but really it sounds quite as incredible as any other hypothesis that can be offered.

Meanwhile, if we look a little closer at what assumes to be a line of communication between the living and the dead, though we may be unable to make a wholly satisfactory explanation on the supposition that this is real, we can get a little start toward some possible explanation. The common spiritualistic assumption has been that a spirit gets into or takes possession of a physical organism conveniently loaned for the purpose, and proceeds to write or talk through that organism in place of its real owner. No long or profound study is required to lead to the conclusion that this is not what generally takes place. Whatever comes from another world, provided anything

does come from that source, the spirit remains in some sense quite apart, and only sends what it can through what might be described as two different layers of consciousness, both of them, it would seem, in an abnormal and irresponsible state. The line of transmission, if such there be, lies through two independent mental strata, either of which is liable at any moment to begin talking on its own account.

First of all, we are dealing with the subconscious mind of the so-called medium. To all intents and purposes that is in a state of sleep, and not under the control of a conscious will. Most likely it is having a dream of its own, and anyone wanting to use it to transmit a message would have to get the message into and through that dream. And behind this subconscious mind there is very constantly, seemingly a vital part of the manifestation, what is called a "control." This purports to be a spirit in charge of the line of communication; and it so frequently intervenes with comment or explanation as to make us know that it is always there. We are given to understand that it takes from some communicator what he desires to send, and transfers this to the medium, who then delivers it to the person to whom it is addressed. Now this "control," almost certainly, is also more or less irresponsible, like the subconscious mind of the medium. If both are forms of secondary personality, they are alike incapable of distinguishing truth from fiction. If the control is a real spirit, very probably it has to put itself, in order to make a line through, into a condition like the medium's trance; which means that it also is in a somewhat dreamlike state.

Imagine then an intelligence like our own on the "other side" wishing to send some message through a channel like this. Obviously a task of no small size confronts it. Its one chance of success is so to get the attention of these two separate "streams of consciousness" that they will

suspend, or partially suspend, their own dreaming operations to repeat parrot-like what they are told to say. The message is nothing that concerns them, and they are apt to take no more than a languid interest in it. Even though they went to sleep with the fixed purpose of lending themselves to such a transfer of intelligence through them, being once asleep they might not much respect that purpose. They might listen carefully and report faithfully, or again they might not. In the latter case they would probably take up with and expound their own silly dream instead.

The conjecture that some such process as this is involved in the communications furnished by automatic writing is not here offered as answering to all the facts in the case; but it goes as far in that direction as one reader of this literature can get. It has to be acknowledged that, as thus described, it is an exceedingly fragile and uncertain line of transmission. Perhaps it is even less trustworthy than what has been already said would make it out to be. For there is reason to think that what comes is largely in the form of symbolic pictures, and that what is delivered is such an interpretation of these pictures as the subconscious mind of the medium can make. If the message were in words, names ought to come as easily as other parts of speech. But as a rule they do not; they occasion great difficulty; though curiously enough they are sometimes given with great ease, and again for no apparent reason cannot be had at all. But the dream-mind which assumes to be delivering the message always spends much time in describing what it sees; a kind of panoramic vision that is passing before its sight. It is possible that some communications which have been received with much ridicule, like that about the cigar factory in Sir Oliver Lodge's book, are due to the attempt to tell something, nobody knows just what, in this pictographic way.

It should be said also that though we have spoken of three separate entities, or quasi-entities, that enter into the manifestations—the communicator, the control, and the medium—the three often appear to be fused together in some inexplicable way, and it is all but impossible to tell which is for the moment on top. Altogether nobody can be much blamed for saying that it is sheer waste of time to fool with what is offered as a possible link between two worlds, if this is the best account of it that can be given. One can imagine that it might be genuine enough, as far as it goes, and that spirits might exist most plentifully at the other end, but would pay little attention to the means of communication because of the extreme uncertainty of being able to use it in any satisfactory way.

And yet a good many of us, as we go over the record, are again and again impressed with the strong probability that, wavering and unreliable as it may be, there is a fitful connection here and that something does get across. It would be foolish to expect very much. Of predictions about the future, for example, we could never be very sure just where they came from or what they were worth. Though we were entirely satisfied about their source, there is no reason to think that spirits with which we are likely to come into contact have much greater knowledge of coming events than we possess. Whatever descriptions may be attempted of the manner of life hereafter, there is no possible way by which we can check them up to determine their accuracy.

The one thing that we can hope to get from the connection, if it really exists, is some new ground for assurance of personal survival after death. This must come from the conviction that good evidence of personal identity has been submitted through the communications. Is there hope of getting evidence of that kind which would satisfy the majority of reasonable minds, and what would it be worth if we had it? One does not see that

the hope is extravagant or absurd. Poor as the instrument is with which psychic research works, it perhaps suffices as well as did the earliest devices for the transmission of sounds by means of electricity. Possibly with further experiment this instrument may be improved.

Those who are closest to the investigation are just as sure that the possibility of intelligent communication has been established as were the men who worked so long on the invention of the telegraph and the telephone. They may be entirely mistaken; but, on the other hand, the people who are sure that there is "nothing in it" appear to base their certainty on *a priori* grounds, which in like case have often proved untenable. Many a quest has been ardently followed with less promise of ultimate success to support it; and it is not probable that the scornful indifference of "orthodox" science will be able to smother this.

If it should turn out that evidence which compels the world's attention and assent can be thus gathered, what would that be worth? At this moment we are much in the mood to say that materialism is not a good word to conjure with. We are not disposed to place reliance on the fruits of a purely materialistic civilization. But can we get what we want out of an idealism which, when all is said and done, is a kind of sunset effect, a painting of attractive possibilities on mists and clouds? Does it not all come down at last to the question, "If a man die, shall he live again?" With the assurance that our personal existence is to be carried forward into another state of being, we seem to have a hold upon idealism and a defense against materialism that can be gained in no other way.

Probably in any event there is not much reason to fear actual extinction of the belief in immortality. But can those who cherish that belief afford to neglect or despise any means of strengthening assurance in the common mind? If psychic research can ever do for the many

what it has done for a few, it has a very important part to play in building up the higher life of the future. This appears to be so plain that one must think the prejudice against it is based, more than anything else, on the fear of its failure. No poverty is quite so bad as that which follows the break-down of plans for the sudden acquisition of great wealth.

This risk certainly has to be reckoned with. Yet the prejudice might be moderated to a reasonable caution. It is not as if we were staking our whole fortune on this one cast. May we not profitably remember the proverb, "Nothing venture, nothing win?" When we consider the changes which the increase of scientific training and the growth of a scientific temper are likely to make in the minds of men, it is evident that there would be much advantage in the possession of something like scientific evidence of the reality of the future life. The promoters of psychic research are quite confident that such evidence, good enough for anybody, is attainable. They may be too sanguine about this; promoters often are. But then again some of us may wonder in days to come why we did not make an earlier investment in an undertaking whose promise we were too slow to see. It is not quite clear yet who the fools in this case really are, and it is as well perhaps to be a little frugal in the use of that epithet.